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The Social Policing of Acceptable Femininity

One of the most hotly contested debates in American society is gender. First of all, there is a difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to biological sex; male, female, or intersexed. Gender is the socially created and perpetuated ideas and ideals, a lot are stereotypical, about gender. This is an argument of nature vs. nurture; are we as humans born the way we are or do we become what we are while we are exposed to society and culture? Each person is an individual and as a feminist growing up in today's America I am completely confused when it comes to dealing with expectations of society. Growing up the daughter of a radical hippie mother, I cut my teeth at women's rights rallies and protests and loved my upbringing that was so different from everyone else's that I knew. But going through my teen years in the late 90's hasn't been easy in the least. I was taught to be myself and defy everything that society expected of me to simply be myself. The shocking thing I found when I held on to this belief is the amount of times my femininity is called into question, by other women not men. There is a belief in a certain form of acceptable femininity and everything else is that does not fit into this mold is frowned upon. Why are so many women policing other women in terms of gender? While many people assert a "live and let live" philosophy; these same women will then turn around in disbelief and giggle when another woman displays some kind of trait that doesn't fit into their idea of acceptable femininity.

The media in America today portrays an ideal image of a super thin woman close to what a Barbie doll looks like. Just by looking around and examining the body types of

the women a person can see in one day proves that every person comes in a different shape and size. The amount of diet ads on TV on any given day shows the American obsession with thinness and for most women unattainable ideal body. In the past the ideal body for women was at a more healthy weight that didn't require a woman to starve herself or develop eating disorders. As Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers explain: "In the 1950's ...curvy women were the paragons of beauty. In those days, the average model was a size 12. Now she's a size 4" (Barnett and Rivers 77). In my own life for example, if a young woman who is a healthy weight for her height, not too thin but not obese, mentions that she thinks she would like to gain some weight to a group of young women they will look at her in shock and disbelief. When women police these forms of femininity that differ from the norm many women simply give in and conform to what society dictates as acceptable gender expression.

All over the media there are images of super thin women in women's faces from the moment they wake up each day; "...magazine covers are routinely emblazoned with supermodels and actresses who resemble famine victims" (Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers 78). For children the idea of what is acceptable and unacceptable is taught from the moment they are born. The first announcement after a child is born is either "It's a boy!" or "It's a girl!" and the other members of the family treat the child differently depending upon what the biological sex of the child is. This creates and perpetuates the idea of gender and what are acceptable forms of that gender. Many people still believe that men and women are still radically different from a biological standpoint. While there are some differences they are small and greatly vary within one sex. As Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers assert: "... but more important is the size of the differences between

men and women compared to those among women and among men. In most areas of life, the latter are much larger” (Barnett and Rivers 13). The differences between women are much larger than the differences between all humans regardless of sex. If a child is not socialized by the culture and society they would be willing to play with all toys because certain toys would not have a gender associated with them. Many experts only focus on the differences between boys and girls but if they just look at children overall it is only in certain situations that a child is discouraged from doing an activity: “...The situation makes a huge difference. When kids are roller-blading together, for example, their sex doesn’t much matter. But when they are trying out for the gymnastics team or the football team, sex makes a big difference” (Barnett and Rivers 222).

When a child is born the announcements go out and depending on the child’s sex they are always pink or blue to very obviously proclaim whether this child is male or female. This is only the biological sex of the child and only once the child is exposed to society can they begin to develop their gender identity. Even if a girl naturally wanted to play with a toy truck for example people in the society around her would react to her playing with the toy and most adults would discourage her from playing with “boys toys” once she got to a certain age and the adult felt it was no longer “acceptable.” As Anne Fausto-Sterling explains: “By helping the normal take precedence over the natural, physicians have also contributed to populational biopolitics. We have become, Foucault writes, “a society of normalization” (Fausto-Sterling 8). As humans there is no activity or task that is more suited to either men or women, each person might have a better or worse ability to perform a certain task but this is not dependent on their biological sex. Each person is a result of their specific upbringing which has to do with where their gender,

race, class, and many other societal inventions collide. If a person was born and given up for adoption they would be a very different person if they were raised in America compared to China. Each society teaches their gender expectations and norms onto the next generation as they grow up. One example of this is from Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz: “She believes that biological instincts or drives provide a kind of raw material for the development of sexuality. But raw materials are never enough. They must be provided with a set of meanings, “a network of desires” that organize the meanings and consciousness of the child’s bodily functions. This claim becomes clear if one follows the stories of so-called wild children raised without human constraints or the inculcation of meaning. Such children acquire neither language nor sexual drive. While their bodies provided the raw materials, without human social setting the clay could not be molded into recognizable psychic form” (Fausto-Sterling 23). These “wild children” show that without society reacting to their actions and thoughts they do not learn what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior. Without a mirror of another human to react to and have react to them they cannot learn many things that most people consider to be innate or natural. The idea of an adult human brain changing and adding new cells throughout life was unbelievable but recently this has been changing: “Observations of wild children dramatize what has become increasingly clear to neuroscientists, especially in the past twenty years: brains and nervous systems are plastic. Overall anatomy – as well as the less visible physical connections among nerve cells, target organs, and the brain – change not only just after birth but even into the adult years... Anatomical change often results when the body’s nervous system responds to, and incorporates, external messages and experiences” (Fausto-Sterling 239).

Society is an institution and the large amount of people in the society will believe or at least think they believe in gender differences. Many people think of gender as something that they have just always known and they assume it was always the same. Society as a whole changes what activities, clothing, or things are acceptable for each gender over time and depending on the society as well. Over the course of each person's life they learn about gender subconsciously or consciously from those older than them. "Both children and adults learn through direct feedback from others to "do gender." Classmates, parents, teachers, and even strangers on the street evaluate how a child dresses. A boy who wears pants conforms to social norms, while one who dons a skirt does not. And he hears about it right away! Gender, then, is never merely individual, but involves interactions between small groups of people" (Fausto-Sterling 244). While it is easy to believe why people think they know their gender from birth it is more of a learning process. One study done by Beverly Fagot and her colleagues found that children could not correctly label people's gender until 2.5 years old. They "studied gender schema in children ranging in age from 1.75 to 3.25 years. They gave the kids a 'gender task' – to correctly classify pictures of adults and children as 'mommy,' 'daddy,' 'boy,' or 'girl.' The younger children (those averaging about two years old) could not pass the test – that is, they apparently had no working concept of gender. The older children, however, (those averaging about 2.5 years), correctly classified both adults and children. Furthermore, those children who had developed boy-girl labels behaved differently from those who had not. The older kids, for example, preferred same-sex play groups, and girls who passed the labeling test were less aggressive" (Fausto-Sterling 247). Each child born starts out with likes and dislikes but depending on what society

thinks of as acceptable and unacceptable it can influence how the child can later feel about certain activities. For example, my mother has always defied the socially acceptable forms of femininity and was a proud, strong, independent, smart, woman who was never afraid to speak her mind. She called me the other day laughing because she shocked my little brother and his two friends. My brother is 14, four inches taller than my mom, and outweighs her as well. He thinks he is very tough and strong now that he is way taller than her so he challenged mom to an arm wrestling match. My mom has always been proud that she is strong for a woman and she can do all kinds of heavy lifting and work. So she arm wrestled him and he lost! Still laughing my mom explained that he was too old to just let him win and she just wanted to try to beat him. Then my brother's friend challenged my mom; she beat him too! The other friend of my brothers' refused to arm wrestle my mom because he was too embarrassed. This is just the kind of thing that my mom and I are always amused by. While most people in society believe the stereotype that women are weak or at least weaker than men, my mom always believed that each person can be stronger than anyone else and sex or gender didn't matter, only individual strength did. Because of this my mom and I find it so amusing when people are surprised by our strength. We are simply proud of our strength because it means that we can be independent and never have to wait for someone else to move heavy things for us. We can do it ourselves.

If a community of people was observed and all of the women were "homemakers" and the men worked the first assumption that a person would make is that this is just the "natural" and "normal" way for each sex to arrange their lives. Instead of accepting this as fact if a person examines many aspects of the culture and the views of the

“differences” between the sexes that they hold another conclusion is normally arrived that. As Barnett and Rivers explain: “If you look around a community and see only women weaving and only men tilling the soil, you are apt to conclude that the “cause” of this difference is that women are suited for weaving and men for tilling. But that conclusion would be wrong. Being female doesn’t automatically give you a talent for weaving. Rigid cultural norms, not biology, are operating here” (Barnett and Rivers 6). Each woman and man has unique talents and if a person’s talents and likes fit into the commonly held social stereotypes then they are considered a “good” member of that society. On the other hand if your talents and likes/dislikes don’t fit into the “normal” expectations held by society you are ostracized and disliked by other members who believe in the commonly held expectations of society. As the gender roles loosen in a culture men and women start to hold the same jobs and achieve a more equal distribution of power: “In our modern technological society, both sexes are doing many of the same things and – lo and behold! – are performing equally well. It’s most likely the job that dictates the behavior, not the gender... Certain men and women may have personalities and talents that make them more suitable for a specific roles, but personality and talent are individual, not gender based” (Barnett and Rivers 6).

The assumption that women are naturally better suited to stay at home and take care of children and that men are better at “hunting” or bring home the money for the family is simply a culturally created myth. Depending upon the certain person and their unique talents, skills, and personality their biological sex might not match the societal expectations for what they decide to do with their life. While American society today is moving toward a more equal idea of men and women there are still many people who

believe that men and women are radically different from birth. Even though this is currently going on this society is still very patriarchal. Women are slowly gaining more positions of power but overall the institutions in our society are run by men. As children are socialized by the culture they still instinctively learn that men are better than women. Overall, our society believes that women hold less power than men and that this is the way things have always been so it must be right. What people don't think about is how much power a person has affects this as well as each person's individual gender and biological sex. "The essentialists view the world through the lens of gender, but they ignore a much more important perspective: Power. When women use care reasoning, it is because they tend to occupy less powerful positions in society and not because of innate quality they possess" (Barnett and Rivers 35). Certain behaviors, such as aggressiveness, are considered "male" and when a woman displays this trait it is considered not normal and individuals in society will react in a negative way. A woman would need this kind of trait though if she was to become a lawyer or bounty hunter. Each talent and trait that a person has can be used differently depending on the job they want or who they decide to live their life. Also, if a woman was put into a position of power she would need to show the people working for her that she is a strong capable leader while the traits associated with that are normally characterized as male traits. As Barnett and Rivers explain: "It's crucial to recognize too that people behave differently in different situations – and their behavior is often determined by how much power they have in a given situation, not their sex" (Barnett and Rivers 36). Children are not born with the assumption of males holding more power in society than females, this is a learned idea. When a child plays with a toy that is normally not one associated with their sex by the society around them

the adults and other children police this show of gender and reinforce the idea that there are certain types of toys for boys and certain ones for girls. Campbell Leaper says: “For example, Fagot has found that boys are more likely than girls to receive negative sanctions for cross-sex-typed behavior. These findings are consistent with the corollary of social identity theory that states that high-status groups are more invested than low status groups in maintaining an in-group identity” (Leaper 73). In my own life I have seen this way too many times. When I was a child I liked to play with “boy’s toys” and I would have a lot of male friends who I would play with. While I was comfortable playing with any toy that I could get my hands on the boys I was friends with would only play with “girls toys” if there weren’t any other boys around. Campbell Leaper explains this more technically as: “... cross-sexed-typed behavior tends to be more common among girls, due to the greater status afforded male-stereotypical characteristics in society. As Feinman observed, ‘Males experience status loss and females experience status gain in cross-sex-role behavior’” (Leaper 73). In American society it is more acceptable for a girl to show stereotypical male behavior and traits than for a boy to show feminine traits and behavior. Because of this when a girl shows masculine traits and behaviors, like I did as a child, the most common reaction was “oh, she’s just going through a tomboy stage. She’ll grow out of it.” I had a male friend who loved to play with Barbie dolls and instead of just saying “oh he’ll grow out of it” most adults would ask his mom why she would let him play with all those girly toys or in subtle ways they would try to encourage him to play with more masculine toys. People become very agitated and uncomfortable when a person displays traits that are stereotypically of the opposite sex without being ashamed

of it and this leads to the many ways that society as a whole polices individuals on their gender expression.

In recent years many problems within society have been blamed on sex differences when really they are showing a problem with another socially created ideal. Many people have asserted that women would not perform as well as men in the workplace over the past few decades but as more and more women get more powerful positions within the work world this is being proven false. Another recent myth is now that girls are achieving better in school than boys are “falling behind” or doing less well. For example, U.S. News ran a cover story about how boys are now falling behind girls in education and they discussed many possible reasons for this. They only focused on the differences between the girls and boys and didn’t take into account many other social factors that help cause this inequality of education success. While they take into account learning styles and biological sex they don’t even touch on economic status. As Barnett and Rivers explain: “Although males drop out of high school more often than girls (a trend that is most pronounced among African American, Latino, and working class white males), Privileged upper-middle-class males overall do well scholastically. Poor and working-class males need help – especially when the manufacturing jobs that these men traditionally occupied are fast vanishing. This is not an issue of gender; rather, its one of social class” (Barnett and Rivers 119). While the media promotes and perpetuates the idea that men and women are radically different most sociological studies have found that women and men are very much alike and that most of the differences that are supposed to be innate and natural are actually socially created. At first glance many social problems could be discussed in a Male vs. Female way but many times to really understand an

issue in society it is the gender, race, sex, and class of the people studied that are the cause.

It is normally assumed that a woman will be feminine while a man will be masculine. When a person does not conform to this assumed and stereotypical standard it is assumed they are different or abnormal. Any kind of behavior that does not fit the norm is policed by society so that an overall dominant norm is established. For example, anyone who dresses radically different will receive many disapproving reactions or as Anne Fausto-Sterling explains: “Classmates, parents, teachers, and even strangers on the street evaluate how a child dresses. A Boy who wears pants conforms to social norms, while one who dons a skirt does not. And he hears about it right away! Gender, then is never merely individual, but involves interactions between small groups of people. Gender involves institutional rules” (Fausto-Sterling 244). This normalizing of and by society occurs in small ways every day and can seem ordinary. For example, a woman who doesn’t pluck her eyebrows and doesn’t believe it’s necessary. Many times other women will comment on this and disapprovingly stare when they realize this woman doesn’t care if her eyebrows are perfectly plucked or not. There are many different kinds of policing that not only normalize gender expression but forms of behavior: “... we ‘do gender’ as part of ‘doing difference.’ We establish identities that include race and class as well as gender, and we do gender differently depending upon our location in racial and class hierarchies” (Fausto-Sterling 244). Everyone experiences this differently depending upon where they stand in the combination of their specific gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, and many other differences in experience and thus difference versions of normal. But society always tries to make everyone conform or: “We have

become, Foucault writes, ‘a society of normalization’” (Fausto-Sterling 8). The problem is with many different versions of “normal” for just about everything. There is a dominant ideology when it comes to something like a man wearing a dress but something like a man with long hair is disapproved of by some but not too shocking.

With different versions of normal someone who is part of some subculture, like the Amish or a child of hippies, will perceive normal as something radically different from someone who believes the dominant ideology. As a young child a girl can act like a tomboy but once she gets to a certain age this is discouraged. Masculine behavior and traits become unacceptable to the larger society when she is a young woman. And then since this woman doesn’t fit into the idea of a normal feminine woman she is sometimes assumed to be a lesbian. Since she is not the feminine stereotypical image of a heterosexual woman she will be ostracized by most feminine girls or teased within the larger society. Children seem to learn gender markers before learning that gender and sex are supposed to match: “In America, at least, small children seem to base their initial, rudimentary gender schema on cultural markers of gender, not knowledge of genital differences. In one study, psychologist Sandra Bem showed 3, 4, and 5 year olds photographs of either a naked boy or a naked girl and then of the same child dressed either in girls or boys clothing. Children younger than three had a hard time labeling the naked children as a boy or a girl, but successfully used social clues – clothes and hairstyle – to classify the dressed ones” (Fausto Sterling 248). The overall dominant ideology dictates these gender markers and traits that go along with that gender. The thing is what about the children who grow up in a household where many parts of the dominant ideology are disapproved of or thought to be wrong. They will be exposed to the

dominant ideology while in school or in the public sphere, but at home and with the families group of friends the same child will be exposed to a different set of norms. So with two sets of norms this can be very confusing. For example, a young girl playing on the monkey bars and hanging upside down might get told to get down and be careful, while her male cousins are doing the same thing without being reprimanded. Her parents wouldn't mind her doing this but an aunt, uncle, or other relative believes the more dominant ideology. This idea of two norms confuses a child even more before sex constancy is learned: "... Sex constancy – that is, they used gender signals such as hairstyle and clothing to decide who as a boy and who was a girl. This also meant that some of these children believed that they could become the opposite sex by dressing as one. Their own gender identity was not yet fixed" (Fausto-Sterling 249). So at home a child may believe it is okay for both men and women to have long hair but then in school be told that only women are supposed to have long hair. Only later in life are people able to see that there are all kinds of different ideas of what normal is coexisting, although some are more tolerant of different beliefs than others.

While most of my childhood memories are considered normal for a girl in American society, my earliest memories are a bit out of the ordinary. My mother raised me to play simply as a child and never placed any importance on what society considered a "girl toy" or "boy toy." She never cared about what society considered normal and she considered being different from everyone else as something to be proud of. For example, my earliest childhood memory is picking out a toy in a huge Toys R Us as my present for being potty trained. I remember staring up at the shelf and point to the coolest construction set ever. There was a crane, little signs saying "caution," road blocks, and

three little construction workers. Bringing up this memory to my mother now that I'm older results in a conversation about how she had been so proud of me in that moment. She was scared of me picking out a Barbie doll that day and being a feminist she hated the whole idea of Barbie's. I was about two at this point and by picking out a stereotypically boys toy my mom was proud because I didn't just want "girls toys," I just wanted toys. Most of these early memories of mine revolve around my mom and me doing something that wasn't stereotypically feminine but more stereotypically masculine. Two years later I wanted a tree house and my father was running his own business which took a lot of work. So my mother simply decided that the two of us would build one. As a 4 year old I couldn't help too much but I remember holding many boards in place while my mom nailed them together. As a testament to my mother's construction abilities 18 years later that tree house is still standing in my yard at home. While it does look pretty dirty and run down it is still structurally sound. From experiences like these and others my mother showed me that a woman can be just as strong and capable as a man. She was and is a strong woman who can build a house or lug around heavy boxes. While there were many trips to the grocery store with me dressed in the pinkest most sparkly princess dress you can imagine, there were also times I would climb a 40ft tree and make the top sway as my aunts got scared and told my mom to get me down. She would always laugh and respond with something like "She does it all the time. I call her my little monkey." If one of my male cousins had been in that tree they wouldn't have been that worried. My mom knew this and just treated me like any other kid, boy or girl. By encouraging me to do whatever I thought was fun and being home schooled until I was 10 I wasn't exposed to many people that followed the normal ideas/ideal of femininity and masculinity.

There are many different women and just as many different kinds of femininity but all women are still judged according to the dominant idea of acceptable femininity. Any kind of behavior that is outside the traditional norms is not only discouraged but disciplined. This also leads to people being held to different standards: “Relational theories (and the ‘caring trap’ they engender) have been forcefully challenged over the past two decades, but they remain stubbornly entrenched, still affecting women’s and men’s jobs, relationships, and personal decisions. In a 2002 Oxygen Media survey, 62 percent of women said that ‘women in power need to act more like ‘real women’ and less like men.’ Did the belief that women must be kinder, gentler, and more tuned in to others influence their thinking?... (In fact, research shows that people expect women to be nicer than men, and so to get any credit, women have to be ‘supernice.’ Men get credit when they’re just civil)” (Barnett and Rivers 34). Most people who are used to the dominant ideology and accept it as how things are, but there are always a small number of people who decide to be themselves even though it is accepted by the dominant idea of normal. But over time the idea of normal changes, recently gay men and women have been fighting the social stigma attached to their sexuality and homosexuality is still thought of as wrong by some but it is becoming more and more accepted within the larger society. In 1920 women gained the right to vote in the U.S. and this was another change in social norms since before this time it was unthinkable for most people to let women vote.

There are still two sides to the debate around sex and gender, essentialism and social construction. Essentialists basically assert that women and men are different biologically so that gender stereotypes are natural and normal. While social construction normally assumes that men and women are generally very similar biologically with a few

differences and that gender is socially constructed. So the ideas about gender are that it is either binary, if you are a man you are masculine, or more flexible, if you are a man you can have a range of feminine and masculine traits and behaviors to different degrees. The problem with the binary idea is that it is an overall idea of what a person should be like, not what they are actually like, and it can influence interactions with people. When most people are asked to think of a construction worker they will imagine the person as a man. These kinds of assumptions can lead to an embarrassing situation or to something like a female construction worker feeling abnormal and ostracized because of her chosen profession. And now that women are working in pretty much every kind of work, even the military, awkward or amusing situations can arise: “When he served as ambassador to Bahrain, the late David Ransom invited a group of Bahraini businessmen aboard an aircraft carrier involved in operations in the gulf. The businessmen came aboard by helicopter. Because the ship was moving, when it was time to return them to Bahrain, the choppers did not have adequate range. The businessmen climbed aboard a supply plane and held on to their seats as the plane was catapulted from the carrier. Once they landed, the ambassador told his guests that it would be courteous to thank the pilot. They lined up as the flier climbed down from the cockpit. The surprise on the men’s faces was evident as the pilot pulled off a flight helmet to reveal a mane of blond hair and earrings. ‘Hi guys, I hope you enjoyed the ride,’ she said” (Barnett and Rivers). While this is a more specific example this kind of surprise for people happens every day. It can be as simple as a girl being better at football than boy or a young woman who doesn’t shave her legs. Small deviations from the norm can shock and dumbfound people who have only been exposed to the normal accepted ideas of how men and women should behave. While men

can be shocked by women acting in a masculine way it is mostly women who police and discourage this kind of behavior in other women.

The overall belief in America is still that men are masculine and women are feminine, the binary idea of gender. But some people believe that a more androgynous model should be the ideal so that each person can freely develop any behavior or trait regardless of which sex it is associated with. So if a woman wants to be aggressive and articulate she can develop those traits to use when she becomes a lawyer or get some other job where those traits are necessary. People can be born with innate traits or behaviors but depending on whether or not these behaviors are discouraged or encouraged effects what they think is appropriate when they are older. As a child my parents encouraged me to develop all of my strengths regardless if they were stereotypically masculine or feminine. Which led to the weird looks I got from girls, who were larger than me, when I was able to carry large heavy boxes that they couldn't the other day. There is a large amount of variation within each sex and some women are stronger than some men or some men are smarter than some women. But there is more in common between all people than difference between the sexes. So by having a model of androgyny people would be able to act naturally and do what they want to without being discouraged, made fun of, or ostracized by the larger society. The belief that there is only one kind of acceptable femininity or masculinity tries to put people into a binary model but because of the large variation in the human race this is impossible. The argument of nature vs. nurture is seemingly impossible to combine but if you let a child develop both feminine and masculine traits they will be attracted to their innate traits and behaviors which could lead to a more equal and satisfied world.

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